



Questions and Answers about Reintroduction of Fishers to Olympic National Park

What is a fisher?

Fishers are members of the weasel family, related to mink, otter and marten. They weigh about as much as house cats (between 4.5 and 12 pounds) and are between 2.5 and 3.5 feet long, including their long bushy tails that make up about a third of their total length. Fishers have thick, dark brown coats with some lighter coloring on the head and back of the neck.

Fishers are nocturnal and stay active year round. They are active on the ground but can also climb well, spending a considerable amount of time foraging and resting in trees. Fishers are solitary except during breeding and denning season.

Where do fishers live?

Fishers are found only in North America. They once ranged throughout the forests of Canada and the northern U.S., including Washington and south along the Pacific Coast Range, Rockies and Appalachians. Overtrapping and habitat loss decreased the fisher's range and by the 1930s they were almost completely gone from the United States. Reintroductions have successfully restored fishers to Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alberta, and areas of the northeast U.S.

Fishers are creatures of the forest and depend on large trees with cavities, along with large snags and downed logs to provide essential den and rest sites. These key features are typically found in mature forests, but often are absent or scarce in managed second- growth forests. Fishers usually avoid open areas like fields, roads and areas that have been recently logged.



Illustration by Peggy Ushakoff

What do fishers eat?

Fishers are carnivorous, feeding primarily on small and mid- sized mammals such as snowshoe hares, squirrels, mountain beavers, mice and birds. They also eat other foods, including insects, fruit, fungi and winter- kill deer and elk. Where porcupines occur, fishers are also well- known for their ability to prey on porcupines, a trait appreciated by foresters frustrated by porcupine damage to commercial timber.

Why aren't fishers found in Washington anymore?

Around the turn of the century, fisher pelts were second in value only to sea otter pelts. Fishers were easily caught in traps, and by the 1930s they had disappeared from a number of states. Predator- control campaigns and poaching also contributed to the fisher's disappearance in Washington.

Fisher trapping ended here in 1934, but fishers did not recover. Harvest of old-growth forest reduced and fragmented fisher habitat in Washington contributed to the species' decline. Today, there are only a few locations in the state where large tracts of suitable fisher habitat still exist. These include the Olympic Peninsula and portions of the Washington Cascades.

Extensive surveys conducted from 1990-97 by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies failed to find any fishers in areas considered to be the best remaining habitats in Washington. Surveys conducted from 2001-04 in Washington's three national parks (Olympic, Mount Rainier and North Cascades) also failed to find any fishers. While there have been occasional, unconfirmed sighting reports, there are no known populations of fishers in Washington.

Are fishers on the Endangered Species List?

The fisher is not listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act, but was designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2004 as a candidate for listing. Reintroduction of fishers may help prevent the listing of this animal as federally threatened or endangered.

The fisher was listed as a state endangered species in 1998 by the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission. The WDFW released a recovery plan for fisher in December 2006. The plan can be viewed online or downloaded at http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/diversty/soc/recovery/fisher/.

Why reintroduce fishers?

Fishers are native to the forests of Washington, including the Olympic Peninsula. Reintroducing fishers would reestablish a missing predator and help restore a balance between native predator and prey species. A goal of the National Park Service is to preserve and restore native animals and processes; reintroducing fishers to Olympic National Park would be a step towards that goal.

There are no populations of fisher close enough to Washington habitats to reestablish on their own, so reintroduction is the only way to restore this animal to the state of Washington. If successful, this effort would lead to removal of the fisher from the state's endangered species list and restoration of one of Washington's native species. The WDFW completed the *Feasibility Assessment for Reintroducing Fishers to Washington* in 2004; this document found that fisher reintroduction could be successful on the Olympic Peninsula.

Why do this now?

Taking action to reintroduce fishers in the near future will likely prevent them from being listed as a federal endangered species.

Since the fisher is a Washington state endangered species, WDFW has already prepared a state recovery plan, which calls for fishers to be reintroduced to Olympic National Park.

Why was Olympic National Park chosen?

The WDFW Feasibility Assessment concluded that Olympic National Park, together with surrounding Olympic National Forest lands on the western Olympic Peninsula, was the best location for the first fisher reintroduction in Washington. Key factors that contributed to this conclusion include the amount of suitable fisher habitat that is protected within the park and the Late Successional Reserves already established by the Northwest Forest Plan within Olympic National Forest.

Portions of the Cascade Range were also identified as potential reintroduction areas.

What is the reintroduction plan?

The first fishers will be released in the Elwha Valley in late January 2008.

Continuing through the winter of 2009-10, about 30 animals will be released per year, with the goal of establishing a founder population of approximately 100 fishers. The animals will be released in three reintroduction areas within the park: Elwha-

Sol Duc area, Hoh- Bogachiel area and Queets- Quinault area, all selected based on the quality and quantity of fisher habitat.

The best time to release fishers is in late fall or early winter to allow them to acclimatize to their new area, establish home ranges and find potential mates and good den sites before the mating season begins.

Where are the fishers coming from?

The fishers released this winter were livetrapped in the Williams Lake area of central British Columbia. These animals are the most closely related to fishers that once occurred in Washington.

How are the fishers being captured?

The fishers being released this year were captured by members of provincial trappers' associations in British Columbia, using cagelike box traps. After capture, the fishers were housed in individual cages while awaiting transport to the Olympic Peninsula. During this time, they were examined by wildlife veterinarians to determine age and sex and evaluated for health and physical condition. Each fisher is fitted with a tiny radio transmitter, either implanted by veterinarians or attached to a lightweight collar.

How will you evaluate the success of this project?

Each fisher will carry a tiny radio transmitter that will allow scientists to monitor the reintroduced animals. By tracking the animals' movement and activities (including home range establishment and reproduction) scientists will be able to assess restoration success and make adjustments as necessary.

Wildlife biologists with WDFW and the Olympic National Park believe the reintroduction has a high likelihood of success, because large areas of good habitat and a diverse and plentiful food supply are available within Olympic National Park and surrounding Olympic National Forest lands.

How will you track and monitor the fishers?

Each released fisher will be fitted with a tiny radio transmitter to allow scientists to track the fishers as they move through their new habitat, establish home ranges and reproduce.

Since most of the park and much of Olympic National Forest are inaccessible by road, much of the monitoring will be done through aerial radiotelemetry, although ground tracking will be used when possible.

Will fishers be added to the federal Endangered Species List after they're released?

Successfully reintroducing fishers to Olympic National Park would be a step towards recovering this species in Washington and would likely help to prevent the fisher's being listed as federally threatened or endangered.

Will fishers stray outside the park?

Olympic National Park and nearby Olympic National Forest lands provide large tracts of suitable fisher habitat. Fishers will be released into these large blocks of mature forest and would not need to travel very far to find suitable habitat.

However, fishers are wide-ranging animals and some individuals are likely to explore lands outside the park after their release. Most of them are expected to establish home ranges in the park and forest where the best habitat is located. Fishers wandering outside the park will be more susceptible to predation, vehicle collisions, incidental capture in live traps set for other species or illegal killing.

Will fishers be a threat to pets or livestock?

Most of the fishers are expected to establish their home ranges in the park and nearby Olympic National Forest where the best habitat is located. Some may explore lands outside the park after release, but west coast fisher populations tend to avoid humans and developed areas. Fisher predation on domestic animals is a rare occurrence throughout the western states and provinces.

However, the recovery of fisher populations near densely populated areas in the northeast U.S. and eastern Canada has brought fishers into closer contact with people. In these areas, fishers are known to occasionally prey on domestic cats, rabbits and poultry.

Are fishers dangerous?

Fishers are not dangerous to humans. They are small, solitary and rather elusive animals, typically avoiding people and developed areas. As with any wild animal, people should avoid handling a sick, wounded or cornered fisher. Fisher predation on domestic animals is a rare occurrence throughout the western states and provinces. However, where fishers have reestablished near densely populated areas in the northeast U.S. and eastern Canada the animals are known to occasionally prey on domestic cats, rabbits and poultry.

Will fisher reintroduction lead to more limits and regulations on how we use public or private land?

Changes in the use of public or private lands as a result of a fisher reintroduction are not anticipated. Most fishers are expected to remain within Olympic National Park or in large tracts of forest within nearby Olympic National Forest.

There is a chance that seasonal restrictions would be enacted on Olympic National Forest or Washington Department of Natural Resources land to protect known active den sites from mechanized activities such as timber harvest or road building. The likelihood of such seasonal buffer zones is quite small however, as managed forests are not anticipated to be used by fishers for denning. There would be no restrictions on access or road use.

Who's involved in this project?

Fisher reintroduction to Washington and Olympic National Park is the result of a strong and diverse partnership. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the National Park Service jointly prepared the environmental assessment (EA) and are partners in developing and evaluating the

proposal. The U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are instrumental partners in supporting both the capture of fishers in British Columbia and post-release monitoring. Olympic National Forest is also cooperating on the project.

Non- profit partner Conservation Northwest has and continues to provide vital funding for the project and Washington's National Park Fund has pledged financial support for monitoring the proposed reintroduced fisher population.

How was the public involved in the decision to reintroduce fishers?

The proposal to reintroduce fishers to Olympic National Park was analyzed and evaluated through a public environmental assessment (EA) process. Public comments provided in early 2006 helped to define the issues and alternatives to be addressed.

The Fisher Reintroduction Plan EA was released in September 2007 for a 30- day public review and comment period. It examined two alternative strategies for reintroducing fishers to the park, along with a no action alternative.

Nearly 200 comments were received from groups and individuals. Each comment was read and considered in the final decision which was made by the NPS Pacific West Regional Director at the recommendation of the park superintendent.

For more information, visit the Olympic National Park website at http://www.nps.gov/olym, which has links to several WDFW documents, including the Final Washington State Recovery Plan for the Fisher (2006), the Feasibility Assessment for Reintroduction of Fishers to Washington (2004) and the Final Fisher Status Report (1998).

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